News release

Floods in Europe - why?

13 August 2002

Central parts of Europe have been dominated by low pressure in recent weeks. The low pressure has been reinforced over the last few days culminating in the heavy rain and floods affecting the Czech Republic and neighbouring countries.

Prague has seen its normal August rainfall in the last 36 hours, and in the mountains to the south-west there has been up to four times normal August rainfall in that time.

In a normal summer an area of high pressure spreads from the Azores to dominate the weather over central and southern Europe and areas of low pressure tend to drift northwards in the Atlantic. This year the area of high pressure has been weaker than normal allowing low pressure to develop more often in the rain soaked areas.

There have been claims that this is linked to El Nino but generally speaking the relationship between El Nino and European weather is weak. It doesn't look as if climate change can be blamed either. Met Office scientists predict more extremes of weather over Europe because of climate change but the computer models suggest extreme rainfall events are most likely in winter. Summers are predicted to become drier over many parts of Europe.

The current wet weather over central Europe is expected to move away but could well return to some parts at the weekend. Closer to home after a drier spell in the south, the weather is expected to turn unsettled everywhere by the weekend.

Notes:

El Nino is the name given to a warming of the tropical Pacific Ocean off the west coast of South America. It can be linked to extreme weather events, particularly in parts of America, Africa, Asia and Australasia. The current El Nino is expected to be weaker than the major event in 1997.

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